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Livestock and Products

Unexplained cow deaths in the UK prompt urgent human health investigation

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Report Highlights:

The unexplained death of a cow in the UK has prompted authorities to investigate whether there are any possible risks for human health.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
London [UK1]
[UK]

On June 8, the UK's Department for Food, Environment & Rural Affairs announced that the country's Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) has recorded what is possibly a new condition in ruminants. Defra's Chief Veterinary Officer, Debby Reynolds, has asked the government's Health Protection Agency (HPA), an organization whose remit focuses on human health, to undertake a risk assessment as a matter of urgency.

In late 2003, a dairy cow suffering partial leg paralysis died at a farm in Northern England. According to Defra, the animal's death was initially suspected as resulting from botulism. However, tests on the animal at the VLA's Penrith laboratory showed microscopy lesions suggestive of a viral infection of the brain - there was no evidence of a Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE) nor were the lesions consistent with other known diseases such as rabies. A number of possible virological causes were followed up but none proved positive. No meat from this animal entered the food chain.

According to Defra, over the last 10 years, 21 similar cases from 13 premises have been identified by the VLA as a result of their examination of routine submissions and a similar pathological condition has also been recorded in Switzerland. That said, concern surrounding this latest case prompted Defra to raise the matter to the UK Zoonoses Group in April 2004, a high level forum chaired by the UK Chief Medical Officers whose remit includes consideration from a public health angle of new emerging diseases. In addition, the HPA, which also has a human health focus, is to lead a risk assessment on the new condition which Defra's Chief Veterinary Officer has asked be done as a matter of urgency.

As would be expected given the sensitivities surrounding animal diseases in the UK, particularly those that might have an impact on human health given the history of the first discovery of BSE in the UK in the late 1980s and the subsequent confirmation of a probable link to a form of the human disease CJD in 1996, the UK media has been quick to pick up on the story. Inevitably, the main focus is not on the fact that a new animal disease might be in circulation but that the UK government is investigating whether there might be any risk for human health. The media has also picked up on the fact that this animal died six months ago but only now is the government publicly acknowledging the investigations under way. In its defense, Defra's Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer, Fred Landeg, has been widely quoted as asking for a sense of proportion indicating that there is no evidence to suggest that there is any risk to humans, but that scientists are not yet ruling it out. Quote In layman's terms, a type of cattle polio was identified which we haven't seen before...we are in an area of uncertainty...the fact is we do not know whether there is any significance for man because we have not been able to isolate a causal agent...we do need to get a sense of proportion in all this. Animals die, human beings die. Human beings die from diseases, animals die from diseases unquote. Needless to say, the media is not reassured and will likely be following this story very closely. The results of the HPA's risk assessment are expected before the end of June.